

**Political Partisanship and the Professional Military Ethic:
The Case of the Officer Corps' Affiliation with the
Republican Party**

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4 May 2000

word count: 6,317

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 04 MAY 2000		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Political Partisanship and the Professional Military Ethic: The Case of the Officer Corps' Affiliation With the Republican Party				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University National War College Washington, DC				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 31	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Abstract

Purpose: This paper addresses an aspect of civil-military relations—specifically, the effect of the officer corps' affiliation with the Republican Party on officer professionalism.

Summary: A recently published survey on civil-military relations revealed that a large majority of military officers claim an affiliation with the Republican Party. The finding suggests that officers have violated their professional ethic by abandoning the tradition of political neutrality. This paper first examines the reasons for the Republican bias, which include the conservatism of the GOP vis-à-vis the Democratic Party and institutional changes within the military. Second, it assesses the effect of the Republican bias on officer professionalism. I argue that the officer corps' voting preference does not constitute partisan activity and is not, by itself, harmful to professionalism and civil-military relations.

Political Partisanship and the Professional Military Ethic: The Case of the Officer Corps' Affiliation with the Republican Party

In October 1999, the Triangle Institute for Security Studies published the results of a survey on civil-military relations in the United States. One of the headline findings, reported widely in academic circles and the press, was that over the past quarter century military officers “have largely abandoned political neutrality and have become partisan Republicans.”¹ Many observers viewed the evidence as signaling a departure from the professional military ethic—the set of values that guides officer conduct. They feared that a politicized military would be less professionally capable, more politically influential, and a threat to American liberal values.²

The Triangle Institute’s finding was not unexpected, as polls and anecdotal reports in recent years had anticipated it.³ What was surprising, however, was the strength of the officer corps’ affiliation with the GOP. Sixty-four percent of the officers responding to the survey identified with the Republicans, whereas only about 8 percent claimed to be Democrats. In contrast, civilian respondents gave the two parties roughly even support. Perhaps most surprising, only 17 percent of officers described themselves as Independents, traditionally the largest military voting group.⁴

¹ Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, “Digest of Findings and Studies: Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society,” Triangle Institute for Security Studies, 28-29 October 1999, 2.

² See, for example, Charles Lane, “Inflated Rhetoric,” *The New Republic*, 3 November 1999.

³ Two recent articles note the growing tendency of the officer corps to be more conservative and Republican. See Thomas E. Ricks, “The Widening Gap between the Military and Society,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 281, No. 7, July 1997, 66-78, and Ole R. Holsti, “A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Evidence, 1976-1996,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), 5-42.

⁴ Ole R. Holsti, “A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Further Evidence, 1998-1999,” prepared for the Triangle Institute for Security Studies “Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society,” Cantigny Estate, Wheaton, Illinois, October 27-29, 1999, Table 8.

While there are several plausible explanations for the bond between the officer corps and the Republican Party, the principal reason is the similarity of values held by the two institutions. In matters relating to social policy and national defense, they share a conservative outlook that has made military officers a natural constituency of the GOP. The voting strength of these officers, augmented by military Independents who favor Republican candidates, has turned the officer corps into one of the most “solidly Republican professional group in American society.”⁵

The voting patterns uncovered by the survey suggest a departure from historic trends. American military officers, committed to the notion of subordination to civilian authority, have a long tradition of avoiding direct involvement in politics. William Tecumseh Sherman argued that “no Army officer should form or express an opinion” on party politics, and many other officers, George Marshall among them, conspicuously abstained from voting to underscore their commitment to apoliticism.⁶ They believed that meddling in politics, including voting in political elections, eroded professionalism by weakening officers’ military expertise and undermining their credibility in providing unbiased advice to civilian leaders. While most observers judge today’s military to be highly professional, the trend toward increasing partisanship could have long-term harmful effects on the institution.

The purpose of this study is twofold. It first will examine the reasons for the officer corps’ identification with the Republican Party and, second, assess the impact on officer professionalism and civil-military relations. I argue that the officer corps’ voting

⁵ Feaver and Kohn, “Digest of Findings and Studies,” 2.

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 232,

preference does not constitute partisan activity and is not, by itself, harmful to professionalism and civil-military relations.

Military Suffrage

The most basic form of involvement in politics is exercised privately in voting booths across the nation. For millions of uniformed personnel, however, casting a ballot was complicated by frequent reassignments and a military culture in which overt forms of political activity were forbidden.⁷ As a result, military voting rates prior to 1984 never exceeded the civilian rates. Even if they had, the effect would have been minimal because the majority of service members voted either as Independents or not at all, and their votes were dispersed in electoral districts throughout the nation.⁸

Military suffrage received a boost following passage of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (hereafter “Absentee Voting Act”) of 1973 and a revised version in 1986. The law obliged states to permit military personnel “to use absentee registration procedures and to vote by absentee ballot in general, special, primary, and runoff elections for Federal office.”⁹ The Pentagon, in turn, required unit commanders to designate voting assistance officers—a total of about 70,000 across the armed forces—to provide registration forms, absentee ballots, and related information to

⁷ See Department of Defense Directive 1344.10, “Political Activities by Members of the Armed Forces on Active Duty,” 15 June 1990.

⁸ For the purpose of this study, I assume a close correlation between voting patterns of the officer corps and the military in general. The assumption is based on the findings of various surveys and anecdotal evidence showing that the enlisted ranks are just as conservative, if not more so, than the officer corps. See, for example, Thomas E. Ricks, “The Widening Gap between the Military and Society,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 281, No. 7, July 1997, p. 66-78.

⁹ Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, 42 USC 1973.

service members.¹⁰ Senior military leaders have placed emphasis on the program by requiring command involvement and setting goals for voter participation.¹¹

Almost immediately after the Absentee Voting Act became law, military personnel began casting ballots in greater numbers than before. In the national elections of 1980, the civilian voting rate still exceeded the military's, but by 1984 the tables had turned (Chart 1). Since then the rate of military personnel casting ballots has increased significantly—as high as 67 percent in 1992—while the civilian voting rate remained nearly constant. The result has been a reversal of the historic disparity between military and civilian voting rates: in the past three national elections, the military has outpolled civilians by over ten

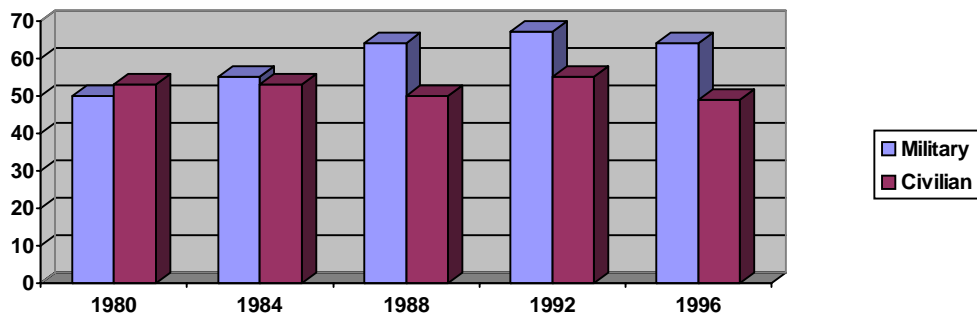


Chart 1: Percentage of Military and Civilian Voters in Presidential Elections, 1980-1996¹²

percentage points. The findings of the Triangle Institute survey suggest that the pattern will continue at least through the 2000 elections.

¹⁰ Federal Voting Assistance Program, <http://www.fvap.gov>.

¹¹ Barton Gellman, "Pentagon Intensifies Effort to Muster Military Voters," *The Washington Post*, 17 September 1992, A8.

The trend in military voting proved a windfall for the Republican Party (Chart 2). New military voters, as well as many who had been Independents and Democrats, flocked to the GOP. Whereas Independents outnumbered Republicans in 1976, the reverse was true in 1980. By 1996, the ranks of military Republicans had swelled to 67 percent, far exceeding the percentages of Democrats and Independents. These statistics, along with the more recent data from the Triangle Institute survey, underpin the argument of those who believe the military has abandoned political neutrality.

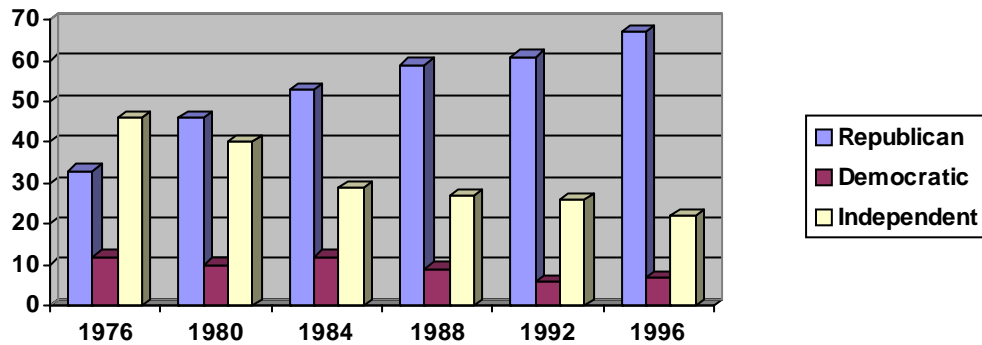


Chart 2: Party Identification of Military Officers, 1976-1996¹³

The expansion in the number of military voters—particularly those favoring Republican candidates—has influenced federal, state, and local elections. In the 1988 Florida Senate race, military absentee ballots decided the contest in favor of Republican Connie Mack over Democrat Buddy McKay.¹⁴ In 1996, two Republican candidates—

¹² Statistics provided by the Federal Election Commission and the Federal Voting Assistance Program.

¹³ Ole R. Holsti, "A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Evidence, 1976-1996," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), 11.

¹⁴ Barton Gellman, "Pentagon Intensifies Effort to Muster Military Voters," *The Washington Post*, 17 September 1992, A8.

one each for sheriff and county commissioner—won narrow victories in the November general election in Val Verde County, Texas. The two winners actually received fewer election-day votes than their opponents, but the 800 military absentee ballots delivered the victory. The losers were less than gracious—they initiated a federal lawsuit challenging the right of service members to vote in absentia in local elections. To their chagrin, the electoral defeat has been followed by a series of judicial defeats.¹⁵

Passage of the Absentee Voting Act helped to explain why service members cast ballots in greater numbers, but not why they voted disproportionately for Republicans. The latter trend was the product of fundamental changes in American society and the military. Over the past few decades, values governing personal morality and behavior have loosened, thus widening the gap between liberals who welcomed the change and conservatives who did not. Meanwhile, institutional changes in the military reinforced the conservative values that always had been central to the profession. These developments made it likely that the officer corps would vote overwhelmingly for Republicans—the political standard bearers of social conservatism. Understanding why the officer corps favors the party of conservatism requires an examination of the set of values that comprise the professional military ethic.

¹⁵ The case was *Casarez v. Val Verde County*, 957 F. Supp. 847 (W.D. Tex. 1997). The plaintiff argued that the Absentee Voting Act gave military personnel the right to vote by absentee ballot in federal elections only, even though the law had been widely interpreted to apply to all elections. In June 1997, the State 63d Judicial District Court of Val Verde County, Texas, found that no illegal votes had been cast. The U.S. district Court for the Western District of Texas, Del Rio Division, sustained the decision on appeal, but plaintiffs have continued the appeals process in higher federal courts. Congress has since considered a Military Voting Rights Act to make the military's right to vote in all elections unequivocal. Despite strong Republican support, the bill has yet to pass. "Jernigan and Kachel Fire Back at Jovita in Voting Lawsuit," *Del Rio Live*, 31 May 1999, www.delriolive.com/news/breaking/1999/053199casarez.html.

Conservatives and Liberals

As a group, military officers tend to be conservative in their professional outlook. The principal reason is the nature of the profession's "functional imperative"—the responsibility of safeguarding the nation from military threats.¹⁶ Given the high stakes of war and the grave consequences of failure, officers must approach their job soberly, avoiding unnecessary risk and erring on the side of caution. As a consequence, there is a hint of paranoia in their thinking. They focus on enemy capabilities instead of intent, prepare themselves constantly for battle, and search for every possible military advantage. Painfully aware of war's unpredictability and potentially high human and material costs, they normally counsel against resorting to war until all other options prove fruitless.

Accepting the functional imperative as the military's *raison d'être* imbues officers with Hobbesian assumptions about human nature. They view man as inherently flawed, motivated by power and self-interest, and predisposed to war. In light of these human failings, they place a premium on attributes that enhance security and teamwork. These attributes form a set of "group-centered" values—loyalty, obedience, discipline, and responsibility—that are central to the corporate sense of officers as protectors of society.

In contrast to the conservatism of the military is the prevailing liberalism of American society. Liberals possess a more optimistic image of human nature. Drawing on the ideas of the Enlightenment, they view man as capable of increasingly elevated thought and action that lead to corresponding patterns of mutual understanding and

cooperation. War and conflict, they believe, result not from inevitable clashes of interest, but from flawed policies, misunderstandings, and other problems well within the power of moral, enlightened leaders to resolve. Liberals have confidence in the power of ideas to bring about desired ends; hence, they accept the necessity of war in defense of vital interests, but only if the motives for fighting are just and the results of the conflict represent progress for humanity.¹⁷

As a result of their confidence in human reason as the engine of reform, liberals give primacy to a set of “self-centered” values—independence, individualism, equality, and self-expression—over the group-centered values of conservatives. Liberals are eager to confront conservative institutions whose values, attitudes, and norms impede individual expression and advancement. Throughout the twentieth century, they have succeeded in securing civil rights and individual freedoms for factory workers, children, the poor, ethnic and racial minorities, and other oppressed and powerless groups. In recent years, liberals have battled the Church over abortion, corporate America over parental privileges, and the military over the acceptance of homosexuals. In each case, they favored the individual over the institution, and self-centered over group-centered values.

One should not exaggerate the differences between the military and civilian society. Many civilians would classify themselves as conservative on a host of issues, and the political power of the religious right in recent years underscores the point.

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 2-3.

¹⁷ Differences between realism and idealism are discussed in Paul Seabury, “Realism and Idealism,” in Alexander deConde, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, Vol. III (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1978), 856-866, and Richard N. Haass, “Paradigm Lost,” *Foreign Affairs* 74 (January-February 1995), 43-58.

Conversely, the personal orientations of many service members are surprisingly liberal, especially now that women and minorities comprise such a large segment of the armed forces. The Triangle Institute's finding that the officer corps is "not quite as conservative as the general public" on social issues suggests the difficulty of applying broad ideological labels to any large and diverse group.¹⁸ Nonetheless, in purely professional matters the officer corps clings to group-centered values that sometimes do not mix easily with the self-centered values of society.

Whatever the extent of the officer corps' conservatism, there always has been a gulf between American society and its military. In recent years, it appears to have widened to the point that some observers perceive an unprecedented crisis in civil-military relations, and they frequently cite as evidence the disproportionate support of the officer corps for the Republican Party. One of the principal reasons for the widening gap was the evolution of a set of political and social conditions that generated a groundswell of radical dissent beginning in the 1960s. The nation emerged from the upheaval more liberal than ever before, adopting to an unprecedented degree the self-centered values of independence, individualism, equality, and self-expression.

Explaining the Nexus, Part 1: The Ethos of Self

The decade of the 1960s witnessed the emergence of an "ethos of self" that spawned a cultural uprising and forever changed the manners and morals of America. There have been other periods of social upheaval in American history, but none that had so fundamental an effect on what the average citizen viewed as normal. The ethos of self

¹⁸ Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, "Digest of Findings and Studies: Project on the Gap Between the

permeated virtually every aspect of society, challenging traditional norms and hierarchies of power. Those who embraced the changes alienated a larger segment of the society and precipitated a cultural war that had lasting effects on America.

One of the earliest harbingers of change was the founding of the radical campus organization, Students for a Democratic Society, in 1962. SDS leaders were at the forefront of the New Left movement that sought to reconcile noble American principles with the reality of poverty, racism, militarism, and other evils in American society. Social elites, they argued, had rendered average citizens powerless, isolated, and apathetic by taking control of major institutions. The government, giant corporations, military, and even the universities dominated the everyday lives of the people through the exploitation of group-centered institutional values. If the people could wrest power from those in control of oppressive institutions, the result would be “a radical movement devoted to nothing less than the reconstruction of American democracy.”¹⁹

The radicalism of the SDS burned out phoenix-like within a few years, but it influenced other movements that likewise rejected traditional institutions and their associated group-centered values. Stokely Carmichael, the incendiary leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, typified the radical embrace of self-centered values in the “Black Power” movement of the late-1960s. Frustrated by the slow progress of civil-rights reform, he declared, “I am not going to beg the white man for anything I deserve. I’m going to take it.”²⁰ Betty Friedan, author of the 1963 classic *The Feminine Mystique* and the founder of the National Organization of Women,

Military and Civilian Society,” Triangle Institute for Security Studies, 28-29 October 1999, 3.

¹⁹ Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 313.

²⁰ Cited in Robert A. Divine, et al., *America: Past and Present*, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), 959.

challenged the conservative notion that women could find total fulfillment in their roles as wives and mothers; she called the home “a comfortable concentration camp” and lobbied for expanded rights and opportunities for women.²¹ Ethnic nationalists—Mexicans, Poles, Italians, Czechs, Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans—fought for greater respect and political power while priding themselves in overt displays of cultural distinctiveness.

Perhaps the most visible embodiment of the ethos of self was the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In opposition to prevailing social values and institutions, the young revolutionaries experimented with drugs, engaged in promiscuous sex, adopted bohemian dress and behavior, and rejected established norms of personal responsibility. Their age was Aquarius, their gods Janis Joplin, Bob Dylan, and the Grateful Dead, and their holy shrine the site of the 1969 Woodstock concert in upstate New York, where the “audience” engaged in a three-day orgy of rock music, drugs, and public sex. The lyrics of a popular song from the era—“Do it, do it, do it till you’re satisfied”—captured the spirit of self-centeredness and could easily have been the anthem of the new generation.²²

The radical movements of the 1960s differed in many ways, but all of them shared a defining feature. In struggling against the conservative institutions and traditionalism of society, they elevated the self-centered values of independence, individualism, equality, and self-expression over the group-centered values of loyalty, obedience, discipline, and responsibility. Radical liberalism was at its apex, and mainstream society had shifted noticeably leftward. Although a conservative reaction soon set in, the system of American values had changed unalterably. Americans were

²¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1984), 282-309.

more insistent on personal freedoms, more confident in challenging institutions, and more eager to express themselves in an infinite variety of ways. At the same time, they showed less tolerance of social restraints, less deference to authority, and less civility toward one another. The new cultural landscape, transformed by a decade of social radicalism, was more alien to the group-centered values of the professional military ethic than ever before in the nation's history.

Explaining the Nexus, Part 2: Republican Conservatism

The Democratic Party was receptive to those who embraced the ethos of self. Founded during the age of Andrew Jackson, the party celebrated the spirit of the common man and took aim at the artificial distinctions and special privileges enjoyed by the wealthy. “Farmers, mechanics, and laborer,” admonished Jackson, “who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain” to their government.²³ Since then, the party has been a haven for the dispossessed and downtrodden—unskilled workers, small farmers, immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and, by the end of the New Deal, African Americans. These groups had the most to gain from challenging the status quo and agitating for self-centered values.

Ironically, the Democratic Party also included one of the most conservative constituencies in the nation—southern whites—whose partisanship reflected a lingering revulsion to the party of Lincoln rather than a commitment to self-centered values. When the party embraced the civil-rights movement and other radical causes in the 1960s, the “solid” South began to crumble. Independent presidential candidate George Wallace

²² Lyrics from B. T. Express, “Do It” (Scepter Records, 1974).

tried to collect the pieces in 1968, but his 45 electoral votes represented a dying gasp of the New Deal-Fair Deal coalition that had prevailed for a generation. In the public's eye, the Democrats increasingly stood for a new brand of liberalism, permissive and nihilistic, that was no longer relevant to its traditional base of support—white, ethnic, working-class Americans. Once the party appeared to support “exotic lifestyles and revolutionary rhetoric,” it was only a matter of time before old Democrats “would be driven straight into the waiting arms of conservative Republicans.”²⁴ In looking back on the realignment, one former party official explained, “We did not leave the Democratic Party, it left us.”²⁵

The turmoil within the Democratic Party signaled a growing reaction to the liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s. By the latter decade, many Americans had tired of the ethos of self and sought a return to more conservative values. The sentiment found political expression in the election of Democrat Jimmy Carter, a born-again Southern Baptist from Georgia. He appealed to conservative voters from the South, many of whom otherwise would have voted Republican, as well as many others who longed for a return to more conservative values. That the Watergate scandal hurt the Republicans was undeniable, but Carter's piety and moral conservatism reflected the rightward shift in public mood and was the key to his victory.²⁶ Ironically, once in office Carter alienated conservatives by embracing the self-centered values of liberalism; as a result, the Democratic Party resumed its hemorrhaging in the next election.

²³ Andrew Jackson, “Bank Veto Message,” in Richard Hofstadter, ed., *Great Issues in American History: From the Revolution to the Civil War, 1765-1865* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), Vol. 2, 294.

²⁴ Ronald Radosh, *Divided They Fell: The Demise of the Democratic Party, 1964-1996* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), xi.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶ William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society Since 1945* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), 275.

The Republicans sensed an opportunity and proclaimed their support for “traditional family values.” They sought the help of the Christian Right, led by Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, in mobilizing the faithful to achieve their social goals through the political system. Ronald Reagan’s endorsement of Falwell’s conservative agenda strengthened the bond between the Christian Right and the GOP and was partly responsible for Reagan’s decisive electoral victory in 1980. The President supported tax cuts, school prayer, limits on abortion, welfare reform, and other social policies that reflected his attachment to group-centered values. Additionally, he increased defense spending to challenge the Soviet Union’s “evil empire,” which Reagan viewed as possibly the greatest threat to American values. Except for the defense build up, he achieved only modest success in these areas; nonetheless, the Christian Right continued to support the Republican Party into the 1990s.²⁷

The popularity of the Republican Party’s “Contract with America” in the 1994 congressional elections was perhaps the pinnacle of popular disenchantment with the ethos of self. Conceived by a maverick Republican congressman from Georgia, Newt Gingrich, the contract attempted to strengthen traditional institutions—Congress, family, law enforcement agencies, the military—and emphasize personal responsibility. Republicans won a sweeping victory in the election, winning control of both houses of Congress for the first time since the 1950s, as well as 32 governorships. While political analysts attributed the victory to a variety of factors, the appeal of a program

²⁷ The most notable exception was Pat Buchanan’s bolting of the Republican Party in 1999. Having failed to win the Republican presidential nomination in 1988 and frustrated over the party’s inability or unwillingness to adopt a more conservative agenda, he announced his desire to seek the Reform Party’s nomination in election year 2000.

emphasizing group-centered values had a strong influence on voters.²⁸ Gingrich succeeded in getting only a few of the provisions enacted into law in the next session of Congress, but several others have passed in subsequent years.

Republican Party's Contract with America, 1994	
Bill	Purpose
1. Fiscal Responsibility Act	Balanced budget; line-item veto
2. Taking Back Our Streets Act	Anti-crime provisions; prison construction
3. Personal Responsibility Act	Welfare reform; emphasis on personal responsibility
4. Family Reinforcement Act	Pro-family tax reform
5. American Dream Restoration Act	Tax reform; child tax credit
6. National Security Restoration Act	Priority for defense spending
7. Senior Citizen's Equity Act	Social security reform favoring the elderly
8. Job Creation and Wage Enhancement Act	Investment incentives; regulatory relief
9. Common Sense Legal Reform Act	Product liability and civil justice reform
10. Citizen Legislature Act	Term limits

In addition to domestic policy, another overlap between the Republican Party and the officer corps has been on the issue of national defense. Republicans would maintain a strong military, but avoid using it unless important national interests were at stake; in such cases they would employ force swiftly, massively, and decisively. The Republican perspective harmonizes with the attitudes of military officers, whose cautious natures are conditioned by an understanding of the consequences of war.²⁹

²⁸ Newt Gingrich was quick to label the Republican victory as the beginning of an ideological revolution, a mandate to dismantle the welfare state, reduce the size and influence of government, and promote free-market reforms. In reality, the elections were far less decisive. Voter turnout was low, and the gender breakdown showed that while a small majority of women favored Democrats, a substantial majority of men voted with the Republicans. These results led political analysts to conclude that the election was decided by the venting of "angry white males" who considered Bill Clinton unfit to be president. Given that the Republican-controlled Congress enacted only four minor provisions of the contract in the subsequent legislative session, the analysts appeared to be correct. Since then, however, several more of the contract provisions have won passage in one form or another, indicating the underlying strength of the movement to group-centered values.

²⁹ Since the end of the Cold War, Democrats have been more willing than Republicans to use military force and to apply it in small doses. Suggestive of the Democrats' approach is the comment of Secretary of State

The national-security program advocated by presidential candidate George W. Bush reflected the Republican approach on using the military. Bush promised a “distinctly American internationalism” that would be flexible in responding to the instability of the post-cold war world.³⁰ He considered strong U.S. leadership essential in countering the threats posed by regional conflicts, rogue states, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Assuming leadership, however, would not mean that the military “is the answer to every difficult foreign policy situation.”³¹ America should be slow to engage troops, seeking instead diplomatic solutions together with major allies and other world powers. If war proved unavoidable, however, the U.S. must wage it “with ferocity.” Bush would “never again ask the military to fight a political war. If America’s strategic interests are at stake, if diplomacy fails,...the Commander in Chief must define the mission and allow the military to achieve it.”³²

Candidate Bush’s pronouncements on the use of force evoked the national-security policy that guided the administrations of Ronald Reagan and the elder George Bush. In November 1984, about a year after the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, proposed that six conditions be met prior to the use of force:

- Is a vital national interest at stake?
- Will we commit sufficient resources to win?
- Will we sustain the commitment?
- Are the objectives clearly defined?

Madeleine Albright to General Colin Powell during the debate over deploying ground troops to Bosnia: “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it?” Michael Dobbs, *Madeleine Albright: A Twentieth-Century Odyssey* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 360.

³⁰ Dan Balz, “Bush Favors Internationalism,” *The Washington Post*, 20 November 1999, A1.

³¹ Ibid.

³² George W. Bush and Karen Hughes, *A Charge to Keep* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1999), 55.

- Will the public and Congress support the operation?
- Have we exhausted all other options?

The subsequent American successes in the invasion of Panama and the Gulf War seemed to vindicate the restrictive “Weinberger Doctrine.”³³ They demonstrated the similarity between the thinking of political leaders on the proper use of force and the professional military ethic: be prepared to fight, use all other means of persuasion before resorting to force, win quickly and decisively if there is no choice but war. In contrast, the failed missions in Beirut and Somalia showed the consequences of applying force indecisively; not surprisingly, these missions were unpopular with the military.”³⁴

The Republicans’ long-standing deference to group-centered values helps to explain why military voters favored the GOP. A fuller explanation, however, is needed to account for the overwhelming level of support in recent years. Other factors were at work in the last three decades of the twentieth century, and principal among them were changes involving force structure, military demography, and officer accessions.

Explaining the Nexus, Part 3: The Changing Nature of the American Military

Structural changes in the military over the past generation have reinforced the conservatism of the military. Most significant was the end of the draft in the early 1970s, which altered the social complexion of the armed forces. Persons volunteering for

³³ Many scholars assert that Weinberger’s senior military assistant, Lieutenant General Colin Powell, was the principal author of the restrictive conditions for the use of force. As a result, they often use the term “Powell Doctrine” instead of “Weinberger Doctrine.” See, for example, Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 30.

³⁴ For a discussion of the Weinberger Doctrine as it applied to the crises of the post-Cold War era, see David E. Johnson, *Modern U.S. Civil-Military Relations: Wielding the Terrible Swift Sword* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, McNair Paper 57, 1997), 81-94. It should be noted that Republican presidents were responsible for initiating operations in Beirut and Somalia, both of which

service henceforth were likely to come from segments of the population that either found military life appealing or were content with the lower pay scales offered by the military—that is, they had few economic alternatives. In both cases, the self-selection process encouraged the formation of a force less representative of the society at large. The contraction of the armed forces following the end of the Cold War further distanced the military from society. Service members least socialized into martial life were the first ones to leave; those who remained were better reconciled to the military culture. The results of these structural changes—self-selection, socialization, and voluntary separation—turned the military into an increasingly homogeneous bloc of conservatism in contrast to the heterogeneity of ideologies in the larger society.

Military demographic patterns over the past three decades also have contributed to the conservatism of the military. The average age of service members has risen by one-and-a-half years since 1972 (from 32.9 to 34.4 for officers and 26.0 to 27.3 for enlisted).³⁵ Additionally, more of them are married than ever before—during the 1990s, the rate of married service members hovered between 55-60 percent, as compared to 46 percent in 1973.³⁶ The offspring of these military households have, in turn, entered the military at a much higher rate than the general public; one study revealed that the sons of career officers are up to six times more likely to become officers than their civilian

ended in failure. These examples show that Republicans were not always consistent in their use-of-force philosophy.

³⁵ “Active Duty Officers and Enlisted Average Age by Paygrade per Fiscal Year,” Defense Manpower Data Center, 6 April 2000.

³⁶ “Marital Status Trends, FY90-FY99,” Defense Manpower Data Center, 4 April 2000.

counterparts.³⁷ Quantifying the effect of these patterns on military thinking is difficult, but they no doubt reinforce the conservatism of service members.³⁸

In addition to structural and demographic changes, trends in officer accessions have further strengthened the conservative bias of the military. Since the early 1970s, an increasing percentage of the officer corps has been the product of the service academies, breeding grounds for institutional conservatism. Between 1972 and 2000, for example, the representation of academy graduates has risen from around 9 to 19 percent.³⁹ Also during that time, ROTC programs migrated to the South from the Northeast, where some elite schools discontinued the program in protest of the military's conservative personnel policies. Wherever they were, the ROTC programs took in fewer candidates, required a larger percentage of military science courses at the expense of the liberal arts, and increased the service commitment after graduation. These trends increased the likelihood that newly minted officers would be more conservative and amenable to making the military a career.⁴⁰

The net effect of the structural, demographic, and accessional trends has been decisive in shaping the attitudes of the officer corps. In surveys conducted since 1980,

³⁷ John H. Faris, "The All-Volunteer Force: Recruiting from Military Families," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer 1981), 550-554. Although Farris's study is dated, more recent information from the Defense Manpower Data Center suggest the accuracy of his findings: a 1992 spouse survey found that 47 percent of service members and 45 percent of service spouses had at least one military careerist in their families. "1992 Active Duty Survey: Weighted Results from the Spouse Questionnaire," Defense Manpower Data Center, 1 May 2000.

³⁸ Michael C. Desch provides an excellent analysis of how military demographic patterns have created a more conservative military in "Explaining the Gap: Assessing Alternative Theories of the Divergence of Civilian and Military Cultures," third draft, September 1999, prepared for the Triangle Institute for Security Studies "Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society."

³⁹ "Active Duty Commissioned Officer—Percentage of Academy Grads per Fiscal Year," Defense Manpower Data Center statistics, 6 April 2000.

⁴⁰ Michael C. Desch, "Explaining the Gap: Assessing Alternative Theories of the Divergence of Civilian and Military Cultures," third draft, September 1999, prepared for the Triangle Institute for Security Studies "Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society," 27. In 1999, 49 percent of the Army's and 41 percent of Air Force's ROTC programs were in the South.

over seventy percent of officers described themselves as “somewhat” or “very” conservative, even as the percentages of women and minorities in the armed forces have reached all-time highs (Chart 3). By way of comparison, the corresponding civilian percentages never topped forty. These findings correspond closely to those of the Triangle Institute survey, which found 67 percent of officers to be self-described conservatives.⁴¹

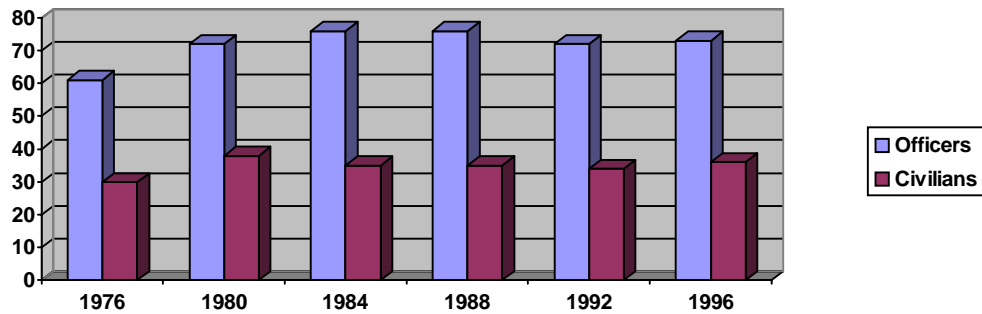


Chart 3: Military Officer and Civilian Self-identification as “Somewhat” or “Very” Conservative, 1976-1996⁴²

Assessing Officer Professionalism

Understanding why officers vote Republican addresses only part of a larger issue:

Does the fact that officers vote with the GOP constitute a partisan influence and undermine officer professionalism? Even if the answer is no, does the perception of such

⁴¹ Ole R. Holsti, “A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Further Evidence, 1998-1999,” prepared for the Triangle Institute for Security Studies “Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society,” Cantigny Estate, Wheaton, Illinois, October 27-29, 1999, Table 9.

⁴² Ole R. Holsti, “A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Evidence, 1976-1996,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), 13.

an influence have ill effects on civil-military relations? Answering these questions requires consideration of the criteria for measuring military professionalism.

As a professional body, the officer corps must accept the responsibility inherent in the functional imperative. Specifically, officers are responsible for using their professional expertise only at the command of society and for its protection.⁴³ Acting responsibly is critical because, unlike other professional groups, the officer corps has the power to physically challenge civilian authority and act in its own self-interest. With its monopoly over the tools of coercion and a disciplined system for employing them, the military must internalize professional values to avoid destroying that which it was created to protect. The challenge of civil-military relations, then, is to “reconcile a military strong enough to do anything the civilians ask them to with a military subordinate enough to do only what civilians authorize them to do.”⁴⁴

Military officers have three main responsibilities to the state: they recommend the allocation of resources for military purposes, advise political leaders on the appropriateness of military courses of action, and execute whatever national-security decisions are made by political leaders.⁴⁵ Officers meet these responsibilities much the way a physician cares for a sick patient. The physician provides information about the illness, recommends the appropriate remedy, and carries out the patient’s decision. Similarly, military officers educate civilian leaders on the details of military issues and

⁴³ Allan R. Millett, *Military Professionalism and Officership in America* (Columbus: The Mershon Center of The Ohio State University, 1977), 1-6. See also Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 8-10. Both authors consider responsibility to be the most important professional trait, although they also discuss, inter alia, ideological homogeneity, socialization, expertise, and corporateness.

⁴⁴ Peter D. Feaver, “The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control,” *Armed Forces and Society* (Winter 1996), 149.

⁴⁵ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 11.

render their recommendations. Whatever the decision, officers execute it to the best of their ability.

The authority to recommend, advise, and execute does not imply the right to participate in the politics of decision making. If it did, the military would become a powerful political force by virtue of its prominent role in society and the means of coercion at its disposal. The professional military ethic therefore requires officers to be obedient to civil authority and, equally important, dedicated to the professional ideal of political neutrality. The ultimate responsibility of the officer corps is the management of violence on behalf of the state; forays into the politics of decision making come at the expense of professionalism. Samuel Huntington, author of the classic *The Soldier and the State*, was adamant on this point:

Politics is beyond the scope of military competence, and the participation of military officers in politics undermines their professionalism, curtailing their professional competence, dividing the profession against itself, and substituting extraneous values for professional values...Civilian control exists when there is this proper subordination of an autonomous profession to the ends of policy.”⁴⁶

The extent to which the U.S. officer corps has abandoned its political neutrality over the past three decades is at issue among observers of contemporary civil-military relations. While Americans in general express great confidence in the military as an institution, the critics decry the perception of greater involvement in politics by military officers. They see many manifestations of the trend, from the disrespect that confronted President Clinton on visits to military

⁴⁶ Ibid., 71-72.

bases to General Colin Powell's public efforts to influence the policy debate on troop deployments, force structure, and gays in the military.⁴⁷

As noted at the outset, the authors of the Triangle Institute survey concluded that military voting patterns signaled the officer corps' abandonment of political neutrality. They implied that an officer who registers with a political party, is attentive to political debate, and votes in electoral contests exhibits a form of partisanship that could render him less professional. Such an officer might allow personal political beliefs to flavor the advice provided to civilian leaders; as a result, he would compromise his professional expertise and forfeit his credibility as an apolitical servant of the state.

The fundamental weakness of this argument is that it ascribes to military voters a level of partisanship that is uncharacteristic of the voting public. The vast majority of people who cast ballots for Democrats or Republicans are not partisans, in the sense of actively advancing the party's interests. Instead, they comprise the "party in the electorate," a much looser affiliation than the "party organization" (party employees and activists) or the "party in government" (elected officials and candidates).⁴⁸ These voters do not have more than a casual involvement in the party's organizational affairs and rarely interact with the political leaders and activists. They are, in effect, the *consumers*, not the *purveyors*, of the party's partisan appeals and policies. Their association with the party is passive—"accepting here, rejecting there, always threatening the party

⁴⁷ For a survey of recent civil-military controversies, see Andrew J. Bacevich, "Tradition Abandoned: America's Military in a New Era," *The National Interest*, Summer 1997, 16-25.

with the fickleness of their affections.”⁴⁹ The moment the party misjudges the priorities and values of its members, it pays the price in subsequent elections. Hence, the support of the military, or any other constituency, for the GOP is not unconditional, and party leaders would be foolish to think so.

This is not to say that senior officers are free of bias. When called upon to advise civilian leaders, they bring to the discussion opinions shaped by their professional and personal values. The views of senior officers may align with either the Republicans or Democrats, but the reason is far more likely to be their professional orientation rather than political affiliation. This distinction sometimes is blurred because of the nature of the issues that influence defense policy. Domestic economic and social issues, such as budget priorities and the policy on gays, affect the military profoundly, and senior officers frequently are drawn into controversial debates on these topics. When that happens, the personal values of officers manifest themselves in ways that can be construed as partisan by those who take opposing views, even though the officers’ opinions are conditioned primarily by professional concerns.⁵⁰

While most senior officers try hard to give nonpartisan advice, politicians routinely use the opportunity to frame military opinions in partisan terms. It has not been uncommon during the Clinton presidency, for example, for Republicans to criticize military leaders for appearing to support administration defense policies. In such a politically charged and unpredictable environment, the personal political orientations of

⁴⁸ Paul Allen Beck, *Party Politics in America* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 8th ed., 1996), 12-13.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁰ The ideas in this paragraph benefited from the insights of Dr. David Tretler, National War College.

officers hardly matter; instead, the military “has the most to gain by staying focused on issues important to it and not trying to engage in partisan wrangling.”⁵¹

If the military were to cross the line between legitimate professional interest and political partisanship, it would be quickly evident to the elected officials, political appointees, congressional staffers, news reporters, and others who are close to the civilian-military interface. Most of them, however, do not perceive a problem in civil-military relations and express confidence in the professionalism of the officer corps.⁵² One long-time Democratic staffer on the House Armed Services Committee could not recall ever seeing political bias in the military. “Senior leaders,” he commented, “are very professional in giving their viewpoint.”⁵³ A Republican staffer on the Senate Armed Services Committee agreed: “When members of Congress ‘see a guy in uniform, they don’t see a Republican. We’re not at the point where officers engage in partisan politics...they still give unbiased advice.’”⁵⁴ Members of Congress have a similar opinion. A Republican congresswoman from New York thinks “it’s a specious argument” that affiliating with a political party diminishes officer professionalism. “An officer’s party preference,” she continued, “is not important to any of us.”⁵⁵ The Secretary of the Army, currently a Democratic appointee, affirmed that senior officers are “uniformly apolitical” while attempting to build “the most constructive relationship

⁵¹ Interview with Secretary of the Army Louis Caldera, 6 April 2000.

⁵² Triangle Institute survey results show that “elite civilians,” both veteran and non-veteran, have generally high regard for the military. See Ole R. Holsti, “A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Further Evidence, 1998-1999,” prepared for the Triangle Institute for Security Studies “Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society,” Cantigny Estate, Wheaton, Illinois, October 27-29, 1999, Table 24.

⁵³ Interview with Jack Pollard, Democratic staffer, House Armed Services Committee, 29 February 2000.

⁵⁴ Interview with Scott Stuckey, Republican staffer, Senate Armed Services Committee, 2 March 2000.

⁵⁵ Interview with Congresswoman Sue Kelly, (Republican, 19th District, New York), 15 March 2000.

possible with the administration and Congress to achieve Service goals.”⁵⁶ These views suggest that the people most familiar with the state of civil-military affairs in America have confidence that military professionalism is “as high as it’s ever been.”⁵⁷

The general public is no less content with their military. In annual Gallup polls conducted during the 1990s, Americans consistently expressed more confidence in the armed forces than in any other nationwide institution. The 1999 poll recorded a 68 percent approval rating for the military, compared to 58 percent for organized religion (second) and 57 percent for local police (third).⁵⁸ While most Americans are oblivious to the debate over civil-military relations, they are clear about their distaste for partisan politics. Accordingly, the institutions that received the highest confidence ratings were consistently the most avowedly apolitical; Congress and the Presidency, on the other hand, routinely inhabited the bottom of the list.⁵⁹ The implied verdict of public opinion seems to be that the military has performed well while remaining within the bounds of professional conduct. Despite widespread knowledge of the Republican orientation of

⁵⁶ Interview with Secretary of the Army Louis E. Caldera, 6 April 2000.

⁵⁷ Interview with Burt K. Mizusawa, former Republican staffer, Senate Armed Services Committee, 29 March 2000. All of the persons interviewed for this article generally agreed that the level of officer professionalism remains high. The names of persons interviewed, in addition to those listed above, are: Ian Brzezinski, Republican staffer, Foreign Relations Committee, 1 May 2000
Michael McCord, Democratic staffer, Senate Armed Services Committee, 15 March 2000
Dr. Clark Murdock, former Democratic staffer, House Armed Services Committee, 6 March 2000
Dr. Robert Soofer, former staffer for Senator Slade Gorton (R-WA), 13 April 2000
Dr. Ronald Tammen, former Democratic staffer for Senator William Proxmire and former Republican staffer for Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR), 24 April 2000
Stephen Thompson, former staffer for Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS), 12 April 2000
William Patrick Towell, Senior Writer, *Congressional Quarterly*, 29 November 1999
Lieutenant General Richard Chilcoat, President, National Defense University, 27 February 2000
Lieutenant General John M. Pickler, Director of the Army Staff, 15 March 2000

⁵⁸ Leslie McAneny, “Military on Top, HMOs Last in Public Confidence Poll” (Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Organization, 14 July 1999), www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr990714.asp.

⁵⁹ The Gallup poll statistics correspond with the data in Ole R. Holsti, “A Widening Gap between the U.S. Military and Civilian Society? Some Further Evidence, 1998-1999,” prepared for the Triangle Institute for Security Studies “Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society,” Cantigny Estate, Wheaton, Illinois, October 27-29, 1999, Table 24.

the officer corps, most Americans apparently do not equate military suffrage with political partisanship.

If one accepts that current patterns of military suffrage weaken civilian control of the military, there are only three ways to fix the problem. The first is simply to proscribe military personnel from voting, thereby eliminating the possibility of transmitting their political bias through the electoral system.⁶⁰ Of course, treating service members like felons would be an odd way for a liberal democracy to reward those dedicated to protecting it, and such a measure would no doubt create more civil-military problems than solutions. Less draconian, but no less problematic, is to transform the conservative culture of the military into something more representative of the society at large. “Civilianizing” the military, however, comes at a heavy price—the erosion of professional expertise and, ultimately, of officer professionalism.⁶¹ Finally, Congress could reduce size of the armed forces to the point that the military vote would be politically insignificant. While this option is popular among those who see few serious threats to the nation in the aftermath of the Cold War, it enjoys scant support in either political party. For better or worse, the United States will field large and powerful military forces for the foreseeable future.

The only effective way of preventing military suffrage from becoming a problem is to buttress the institutional values of the military. Senior leaders must reinforce the professional military ethic, which prohibits open political activity and emphasizes the

⁶⁰ An argument for the military to voluntarily refrain from voting is in Andrew J. Bacevich and Richard H. Kohn, “Grand Army of the Republicans: Has the U.S. Military Become a Partisan Force?,” *New Republic* (December 8, 1997), 22-25.

⁶¹ Civilianizing the military (“subjective control”) as a measure to manage civil-military relations is discussed in several passages of Huntington’s *The Soldier and the State*; in particular, see pages 80-83.

ideal of apolitical service to the nation.⁶² Professional education and incentives are the methods of choice for encouraging proper behavior, but punishing transgressions is equally important. Should the ethic be compromised, one of the first casualties would be the political neutrality of the officer corps, and at that point the ballots cast by military personnel would take on an ominously partisan flavor. We are not at that point, notwithstanding the high-profile cases of military leaders intruding into politics. For every letter to the editor of the *New York Times* by a senior military leader, there are thousands of civil-military interactions that take place every day within the bounds of professional behavior.⁶³ Still, the potential for abuse is ever present, and everyone concerned—both military and civilian—have good reason to be vigilant.

Conclusion

The evidence that military suffrage has a neutral effect on officer professionalism does not imply that all is well with civil-military relations. Despite the confidence of civilian leaders and the public in the military, might the officer corps be slowly losing its professional bearings? Does the growing influence of the military in national-security decisions portend a crisis in civil-military relations? A number of eminent historians, political scientists, journalists, and former military officers aver in this assessment. One has accused the military of being “out of control;” another claims that military officers

⁶² See Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 83-85, for a discussion of “objective control”—i.e., maximizing civilian control through the “recognition of autonomous military professionalism.” Civilian leaders apply objective control by nurturing officer professionalism, thus rendering the military “politically sterile and neutral.”

⁶³ Colin Powell, “Why Generals Get Nervous,” *New York Times*, 8 October 1992. Powell’s letter provoked a firestorm of criticism because it attempted to influence U.S. policy in the Balkans by taking the military’s case directly to the public. That the tactic worked so well underscored the potential for inappropriate military influence in politics.

are “dictating defense policy.”⁶⁴ Their arguments, supported by the Triangle Institute survey, merit close scrutiny, and the need to constantly monitor the state of civil-military relations is incontrovertible. If their case is valid, however, the reason is not that officers overwhelmingly vote Republican. Nothing in the military voting patterns suggests that casting a ballot undermines responsibility—the most important criterion of officer professionalism.

A decline in military professionalism is most likely to result from the officer corps losing its focus on fighting and winning the nation’s wars. This is something the critics of civil-military relations well understand, and they provide a valuable corrective to the bureaucratic complacency that may blind military and civilian leaders to underlying trends. Staying focused on the functional imperative, however, does not mean that officers should ignore the political environment around them. They must understand the political system to more effectively provide military advice and protect the interests of the profession. Exercising their constitutional right to vote is a logical extension of that awareness.

⁶⁴ See Richard H. Kohn, “Out of Control: The Crisis in Civil-Military Relations,” *The National Interest*, No. 35, Spring 1994, 3-17, and David E. Johnson, *Modern U.S. Civil-Military Relations: Wielding the Terrible Swift Sword* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, McNair Paper 57, 1997), 104.